

and study the dusk washing blue over the city, or watch white people from the better neighborhoods nearby walk their dogs down our block to let the animals shit on our curbs—"Scoop the poop, you bastards!" my roommate would shout with impressive rage, and we'd laugh at the faces of both master and beast, grim and unapologetic as they hunkered down to do the deed.

I enjoyed such moments—but only in brief. If the talk began to wander, or cross the border into familiarity, I would soon find reason to excuse myself. I had grown too comfortable in my solitude, the safest place I knew.

I remember there was an old man living next door who seemed to share my disposition. He lived alone, a gaunt, stooped figure who wore a heavy black overcoat and a misshapen fedora on those rare occasions when he left his apartment. Once in a while I'd run into him on his way back from the store, and I would offer to carry his groceries up the long flight of stairs. He would look at me and shrug, and we would begin our ascent, stopping at each landing so that he could catch his breath. When we finally arrived at his apartment, I'd carefully set the bags down on the floor and he would offer a courtly nod of acknowledgment before shuffling inside and closing the latch. Not a single word would pass between us, and not once did he ever thank me for my efforts.

The old man's silence impressed me; I thought him a kindred spirit. Later, my roommate would find him crumpled up on the third-floor landing, his eyes wide open, his limbs stiff and curled up like a baby's. A crowd gathered; a few of the women crossed themselves, and the smaller children whispered with excitement. Eventually the paramedics arrived to take away the body and the police let themselves into the old man's apartment. It was neat, almost empty—a chair, a desk, the faded portrait of a woman with heavy eyebrows and a gentle smile set atop the mantelpiece. Somebody opened the refrigerator and found close to a thousand dollars in small bills rolled

up inside wads of old newspaper and carefully arranged behind mayonnaise and pickle jars.

The loneliness of the scene affected me, and for the briefest moment I wished that I had learned the old man's name. Then, almost immediately, I regretted my desire, along with its companion grief. I felt as if an understanding had been broken between us—as if, in that barren room, the old man was whispering an untold history, telling me things I preferred not to hear.

It must have been a month or so later, on a cold, dreary November morning, the sun faint behind a gauze of clouds, that the other call came. I was in the middle of making myself breakfast, with coffee on the stove and two eggs in the skillet, when my roommate handed me the phone. The line was thick with static.

"Barry? Barry, is this you?"

"Yes. . . . Who's this?"

"Yes, Barry . . . this is your Aunt Jane. In Nairobi. Can you hear me?"

"I'm sorry—who did you say you were?"

"Aunt Jane. Listen, Barry, your father is dead. He is killed in a car accident. Hello? Can you hear me? I say, your father is dead. Barry, please call your uncle in Boston and tell him. I can't talk now, okay, Barry. I will try to call you again. . . ."

That was all. The line cut off, and I sat down on the couch, smelling eggs burn in the kitchen, staring at cracks in the plaster, trying to measure my loss.

At the time of his death, my father remained a myth to me, both more and less than a man. He had left Hawaii back in 1963, when I was only two years old, so that as a child I knew him only through the stories that my mother and grandparents told. They all had their favorites, each one seamless, burnished smooth from repeated use. I can still picture Gramps leaning back in his old stuffed chair after dinner, sipping whiskey and cleaning his teeth with the cellophane

from his cigarette pack, recounting the time that my father almost threw a man off the Pali Lookout because of a pipe. . . .

"See, your mom and dad decided to take this friend of his sight-seeing around the island. So they drove up to the Lookout, and Barack was probably on the wrong side of the road the whole way over there—"

"Your father was a terrible driver," my mother explains to me. "He'd end up on the left-hand side, the way the British drive, and if you said something he'd just huff about silly American rules—"

"Well, this particular time they arrived in one piece, and they got out and stood at the railing to admire the view. And Barack, he was puffing away on this pipe that I'd given him for his birthday, pointing out all the sights with the stem, like a sea captain—"

"Your father was really proud of this pipe," my mother interrupts again. "He'd smoke it all night while he studied, and sometimes—"

"Look, Ann, do you want to tell the story or are you going to let me finish?"

"Sorry, Dad. Go ahead."

"Anyway, this poor fella—he was another African student, wasn't he? Fresh off the boat. This poor kid must've been impressed with the way Barack was holding forth with this pipe, 'cause he asked if he could give it a try. Your dad thought about it for a minute, and finally agreed, and as soon as the fella took his first puff, he started coughing up a fit. Coughed so hard that the pipe slipped out of his hand and dropped over the railing, a hundred feet down the face of the cliff."

Gramps stops to take another nip from his flask before continuing. "Well, now, your dad was gracious enough to wait until his friend stopped coughing before he told him to climb over the railing and bring the pipe back. The man took one peek down this ninety-degree incline and told Barack that he'd buy him a replacement—"

"Quite sensibly," Toot says from the kitchen. (We call my grand-

mother Tutu, Toot for short; it means "grandparent" in Hawaiian, for she decided on the day I was born that she was still too young to be called Granny.) Gramps scowls but decides to ignore her.

"—but Barack was adamant about getting *his* pipe back, because it was a gift and couldn't be replaced. So the fella took another look, and shook his head again, and that's when your dad picked him clear off the ground and started dangling him over the railing!"

Gramps lets out a hoot and gives his knee a jovial slap. As he laughs, I imagine myself looking up at my father, dark against the brilliant sun, the transgressor's arms flailing about as he's held aloft. A fearsome vision of justice.

"He wasn't really holding him over the railing, Dad," my mother says, looking to me with concern, but Gramps takes another sip of whiskey and plows forward.

"At this point, other people were starting to stare, and your mother was begging Barack to stop. I guess Barack's friend was just holding his breath and saying his prayers. Anyway, after a couple of minutes, your dad set the man back down on his feet, patted him on the back, and suggested, calm as you please, that they all go find themselves a beer. And don't you know, that's how your dad acted for the rest of the tour—like nothing happened. Of course, your mother was still pretty upset when they got home. In fact, she was barely talking to your dad. Barack wasn't helping matters any, either, 'cause when your mother tried to tell us what had happened he just shook his head and started to laugh. 'Relax, Anna,' he said to her—your dad had this deep baritone, see, and this British accent." My grandfather tucks his chin into his neck at this point, to capture the full effect. " 'Relax, Anna,' he said. 'I only wanted to teach the chap a lesson about the proper care of other people's property!' "

Gramps would start to laugh again until he started to cough, and Toot would mutter under her breath that she supposed it was a good thing